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### Ohio State Engineer

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# The Engineer's Bookshelf

By Wilson R. Dumble

## 50 American Short Stories

From time to time, when short story anthologies appear on the bookshelves in the libraries I always advance toward them with a certain amount of anxiety, thumb them with a degree of interest, scan the table of contents, and then finally decide that I too can pick the best stories published over a given period of time. Of course it is true that your tastes and my tastes in the selection will not coincide. That is to be expected. But likewise expected, is the very fact that our tastes—this is, yours and mine—will not coincide with one Mr. Edward J. O'Brien's.

For the past twenty-five years Mr. O'Brien has been reading hundreds of thousands of short stories, and year in and year out for the last quarter of a century he has been publishing the best short stories of the past year in a volume to be sold to the reading public at a considerable sum. Sometimes his choice has been fine; a few times it has been good; but quite frequently it has been pretty bad. Despite our frequent disagreement, however, I always enjoy seeing what Mr. O'Brien has selected, even if only to growl about his choice.

Now, Mr. O'Brien has selected fifty stories from American writers in the last twenty-five years, and has published them in a volume which he crowingly names "50 American Short Stories." In his preface to the book he calls them "the living stories of the past twenty-five years", and he hastens to add that you "should watch them grow."

The first one in the collection is "The Yellow Cat" by Wilbur Daniel Steele, published in 1915 in Harper's Magazine. It is as old and rusty, rheumatic and antiquated as any that he could find published in that year. The last story in the volume is as recent as this morning's newspaper; it is called "Bright and Morning Star", written by Richard Wright, one of the most distinguished writers that the Negro race has produced. And all the other forty-eight stories lying in wait between the first and the last, have been picked to prove Mr. O'Brien's thesis: "During one short generation American writing has evolved from the point at which it could only be described as extremely provincial English writing to the point where it has achieved dignity and substance as a rich literature in its own right."

But, in order to prove this thesis, I believe that Mr. O'Brien has selected a group of the dullest stories ever brought together in one volume. True it is, indeed, that many famous short story authors are included in his list; and true it is that some of the stories are very, very fine; but certain authors' best stories are not always selected. Let me take an example. For the year 1920 Mr. O'Brien has selected Frances G. Wood's "Turkey Red"; and a good story it certainly is, too. But 1920 is also the very year that Willa S. Cather wrote "Paul's Case" and "The Sculptor's Funeral", two stories so infinitely better than the Wood story

that they cannot stand comparison. Miss Cather has a story listed in the volume for the year 1929; it is her "Double Birthday", a story not so good as those two just mentioned, and a story that is not representative of the year in which it was published. For 1929 is the date of publication of Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers", one of his best if not his very best story. Hemingway, to be sure, is listed under the year 1923 with "My Old Man", a story not as good as "The Killers." It is all quite complicated, I admit; but I cannot help but feel that the editor has not selected stories that are representative of the year in which they were written. Of course, if he had done that very thing, he would have had no thesis to prove, and hence no volume.

It is an interesting collection just the same, and some of the stories are of the super fine variety: Dorothy Parker's "A Telephone Call", Kay Boyle's "Rest Cure", Albert Maltz's "A Man on the Road", John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums", and the one causing so much recent comment by the young Italian writer, Di Donato, "Christ in Concrete".

All in all, "50 American Short Stories" is just another interesting collection of short stories. It does not show, as the editor would have us believe, that the American short story has "begun to grow for the first time in an organic way." However, the result of its growing pains has not always been for the better; I sometimes am inclined to think that it has been for the worse.

## Reaching for the Stars

During these days of world strife when European countries are trying to reduce all matter "to the last syllable of recorded time", many readers of fiction are turning their attention to the reading of non-fiction. I fancy that I am one of them; for during the last eight weeks I have dipped into the books of John Gunther, Vincent Sheean and a few others. Moreover, I discover that one of the most readable books about affairs leading up to the waring crisis

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in Europe is entitled "Reaching for the Stars" by Mrs. Nora Waln.

Mrs. Waln is an American Quaker, who, after spending some few years in China, lived with her husband in Germany between 1934 and 1938. Her book is a sincere attempt at interpretation of the Germany she saw during those four years, with not even a trace of bitterness or malice. "Reaching for the Stars" is superb writing; it is worth any reader's time.

Before entering Germany Mrs. Waln was told by a Belgium friend that "power and glory are certainly the aim of many Germans, otherwise they would not have been tempted to listen to Nazi theories", and that "they will surely bear all that he (Hitler) imposes on them, not only willingly but with enthusiasm, just so long as he inflates German importance." Beginning on this note the reader follows Mrs. Waln's observations in various cities in the Rhineland, in Vienna, in Czechoslovakia, and in Dresden.

During her first evening in Bonn, Mrs. Waln heard the chorusing in a nearby cafe where songs from Brahms, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Wolf were chanted by an orderly crowd of middle-aged men and women. In still another city she tells of the "black coffin" brought to the home of a neighbor, a coffin containing the remains of the Jewish husband of the household, where the widow was made to pay five thousand marks for a burial service. The coffin was not allowed to be opened; the widow was told her husband had committed suicide. In still another city Mrs. Waln discovered that the munition factories were "tremendously expanded, and are working day and night, as are the navy yards. Miners work a fourteen-hour shift, or longer if there is a press."

You will not soon forget "Reaching for the Stars". You will probably agree that

"... all our yesterdays have lighted fools'  
The way to dusty death."

"Who ever told that guy he was a prof. He might know it, but be darned if he can teach it. The trouble is that he is too far advanced. Every time he tries to explain something he gets so far off the subject that no one understands anything about it. He oughta go back to the farm, or try teaching a more advanced course . . .

"Yeah,—I flunked it too."

Stolen

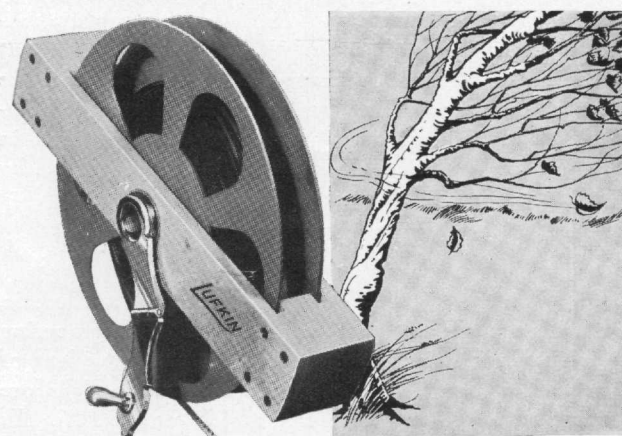
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